



## Serving Those Who Serve: Higher Education and America's Veterans

Campuses across the country, representing every sector in higher education, are on the cusp of serving more than 2 million military veterans as they return from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. This group will benefit from the eagerly anticipated and much welcomed passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (the “new GI Bill”), landmark legislation that provides the men and women of today’s all-volunteer force with a benefits package to make a college education truly affordable. But it is going to require more than enhanced benefits to ensure that our nation’s returning veterans can attain a college education. Many may not even enroll because of an absence of easily accessible information, effective outreach, and veteran-friendly practices. And with less than a year until the new GI Bill’s implementation, higher education must act immediately to develop programs that more effectively promote access and success for this underrepresented group.

The leadership and promise of this newest generation of veterans—and the many opportunities for colleges and universities to serve them—were prominently displayed during the June 2008 presidential summit, *Serving Those Who Serve: Higher Education and America’s Veterans*. Sponsored by the American Council on Education and hosted by Georgetown University, more than 200 college and university presidents, senior military leaders, student veterans, campus representatives, and other stakeholders engaged in an open forum on the barriers veterans face as they make the journey to and through higher education. Through the introduction of innovative programs and promising practices, summit participants offered creative solutions to educational roadblocks for veterans.

### The Post-9/11 GI Bill

As of August 2009, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 will provide more than 2 million veterans the opportunity to attend college full time. The bill does the following:

- Covers the cost of any public institution’s undergraduate program of the veteran’s choice.
- Gives veterans a monthly allowance for housing and an annual book stipend.
- Matches dollar for dollar the additional costs for attending a private institution.
- Provides for transferability of education benefits to veterans’ immediate family members.

The bill presents some challenges and limitations for both higher education institutions and veterans, however, including the following:

- Money for education benefits will go directly to institutions rather than student veterans, requiring the creation of a new model for benefit delivery.
- Veterans who study half-time or less, or are enrolled in a distance education program, are eligible for only the tuition benefits.

With the summit serving as a catalyst to further action, the American Council on Education (ACE) has launched a broad-based initiative aimed at facilitating a seamless transition from the battlefield to the classroom. Specific areas of focus include:

- Calling public attention to the new GI Bill and higher education's engagement in serving those who serve.
- Supporting colleges and universities in developing programs designed to increase access and success for military veterans.
- Facilitating the introduction and implementation of the new GI Bill's administrative provisions.
- Implementing an outreach strategy to inform military veterans of their education benefits and to assist in their college planning.

**Serving Those Who Serve: The ACE Agenda for Veterans' Postsecondary Access and Success**

Through the growing support of organizations such as The Wal-Mart Foundation and Lumina Foundation for Education, ACE has created an agenda—[Serving Those Who Serve](#)—to support higher education institutions in building capacity to serve America's veterans. Here are some of the initiatives:

**Fall 2008**

- **Institutional Survey:** A national survey of 4,300 colleges and universities to identify the extent of programs and services provided to veterans and active-duty military.  
*In collaboration with the [Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges \(SOC\)](#), [Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education \(NASPA\)](#), and the [National Association of Veterans' Programs Administrators \(NAVPA\)](#).*

**Winter 2009**

- **GI Bill Implementation Meetings:** Three regional meetings to assist colleges and universities in preparing for the August 2009 implementation of the new GI Bill.  
*In collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs.*

**Spring 2009**

- **Portal to Veterans' Success:** A comprehensive web site with easily accessible information on federal and state education benefits, campus and community resources, and steps to prepare for and begin postsecondary education.
- **Incentive Grants:** Award of incentive grants to colleges and universities to recognize promising practices and to support the development of programs that foster veterans' postsecondary access and success.

**Fall 2009**

- **Postsecondary Participation Report:** Analysis of data to describe the current participation of active-duty military and veterans in postsecondary education, as well as the population of veterans that colleges and universities could serve in the future.

**Spring 2010**

- **Survey of Veterans:** A survey of military veterans who have not used their new GI Bill benefits, in order to gain insights about their reasons for non-participation and to help both higher education and military organizations develop new outreach and support strategies.

### **The Current Landscape: Post-9/11 Veterans in Higher Education**

Today's student veterans demonstrate many of the characteristics of "nontraditional" students. Veterans include older students with work and family responsibilities, students whose college entry has been delayed, first-generation students, and students from the lower and middle quartiles of socioeconomic status. Equally important when considering programmatic initiatives is that more than 1.6 million veterans have served in a combat environment since September 11, 2001. These experiences lend themselves to a whole new set of barriers to the attainment of postsecondary aspirations.

Further defining the current cohort is made more difficult by the absence of data to indicate enrollment trends, persistence rates, and other information specific to veteran engagement in higher education. "It all starts with the way we count," according to Cliff Adelman, senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy. Currently, the U.S. Department of Education does not collect annual data on the veteran student population and what data are collected are not representative. "We don't see veterans in the data," said Adelman. "They're not counted and we have to find out what happens" when they participate in postsecondary education.

Despite the lack of data, findings from the ACE summit as well as focus group research have delineated some factors that positively affect veteran participation in higher education—namely, greater access to accurate and timely information; streamlined processes for accessing education benefits; academic credit for military training and experience; and transitional support programs on college campuses.

## Right Questions, Right Answers: Access to Information

*“A lot of these guys that come home don’t know anything about [college]. They don’t even know to ask questions. There’s just not enough information.”*—Veteran, ACE focus group.

Why don’t more veterans go to college? Focus group research revealed a number of reasons, such as needing to find a job right away to support their families and transitioning into a job immediately and not seeing the need for more education. Others assumed that the administrative process would be too much of a hurdle, or that college wasn’t an option. Said one veteran participating in an ACE focus group: “Some of my friends are intimidated. . . . They have been in the military for a long time. They didn’t have the mindset to look forward to go to school. They were of the assumption that school isn’t for everyone. They would rather go out and get a job.”

Many veterans indicated that lack of awareness is a major obstacle. Student veteran testimonials and the focus group findings confirmed that veterans are often unaware of the specifics of their education benefits and even less aware of the national, state, and campus programs intended to serve their needs. Specifically, focus group participants stated that they did not have as many information sources *after* transitioning from the military as they did when in the service. Noted one veteran, “The military tells you you’ve got this and you’ve got that. But then once you get out, they don’t tell you how to go about getting this stuff.”

On their own, many veterans depend on the Internet. However, the information they need is often not easy to access, especially on many college and university web sites. One focus group participant suggested that institutions each place a link on their home pages labeled “Veterans,” instead of asking potential students to dig for it. “Put it on the front page at the top, you know, if they want us to use the GI Bill.”

### From Application to Access: Just a Few Clicks Away

With just a few clicks, Minnesota State College and University system’s [My Military Education](#) web site takes veterans to information on scholarships and deadlines, the Minnesota GI Bill, degree programs, and career fairs. One of the most popular links is a going-to-college checklist.

Also at the state level is California’s [Troops to College](#) initiative, with a web site that provides direct links to programs and services at California State University campuses, California community colleges, and the University of California system. Veterans can easily access admissions requirements, student fees, transfer policies, and online applications, as well as link to benefits information; clear descriptions of degree programs, from teaching credentials to distance learning formats; and the latest student veteran news.

Julia O'Dell, president of the [National Association of Veterans Upward Bound Program Personnel](#) (NAVUBPP), confirmed the difficulties. "I spent 40 minutes on a university web site trying to find help for returning veterans. I knew the information was there, I just couldn't find it," said O'Dell. "Some veterans are persistent and they will spend two to three hours trying to access the information they need. But others won't." In addition to lack of easy access, confusing information can discourage all but the most persistent would-be student.

Although veterans appreciate easily accessible web sites, they also emphasize the value of personal interactions. Natasha McKinnon, a wounded warrior and an Army veteran currently enrolled at North Carolina State University, initially felt she was on her own and identified online courses in which to enroll. As she was recovering from injuries at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, however, she took advantage of one-on-one academic advising offered on site by ACE's new [Severely Injured Military Veterans Program](#). The adviser connected McKinnon with campus administrators who were also veterans.

Providing veterans with information when they are ready for it makes a difference in their potential access to higher education. When transitioning out of the military, veterans are focused on jobs, family, and housing; adjusting to civilian life; and often managing physical and emotional injuries. There's a good chance that college will not be on the radar for many veterans. Getting enough information at the right time *and more than once* during transitional periods can be what determines whether veterans enroll in college—and stay enrolled. "If the information was also presented six months or a year down the road," said a veteran participating in the focus group research, "I think more people might listen." Further, peers sharing experiences about benefits or transcripts offer an even stronger incentive to work around administrative obstacles. Another veteran reflected on the advantages of setting up such a peer system: "You get together every so often—all of you or maybe just one-on-one—to talk about issues and talk about opportunities. I think those would be great ways to inform [veterans]."

### **Jumping Hurdles: Administrative Obstacles for Student Veterans**

*“The main thing is just having the information so that once we do come to the university, we [know] what transfers over. I had credits from when I was in the Marine Corps. The registrar looked at me like I was stupid, trying to get credits for these classes. I just started over.”—Veteran, ACE focus group.*

The lack of accurate information is one obstacle for many college-bound veterans. Findings from the Veterans Summit and focus groups also revealed that veterans are concerned about institutional understanding of the military, especially in two areas: the use of education benefits and the application of military training toward a degree program. In the focus groups, for example, some veterans said they felt they would have to educate colleges about how to use their benefits, while other veterans had had an easier time navigating the system because the university worked closely with its military counterpart. One veteran spoke positively about his experience, saying: “It was easy for me because they have the Department of Veterans Affairs right there. . . . I was able to get all the assistance. . . . It really helped me out as a veteran.”

At the same time, many veterans know little about their education benefits, especially the specifics of the new GI Bill, which educators themselves are just beginning to understand. Many participants in the focus group research admitted to hearing about the legislation, but felt that more could be done to inform service members of how it would apply to them. According to a veteran in one of the focus groups, “Unless you go to a VA site or something like that, you won’t hear about it. It’s not like you turn on the TV and it’s there.”

And what veterans don’t know has hurt them. From the outset of their postsecondary experience, many veterans have encountered financial challenges, beginning with the wait for education benefits. Not surprisingly, some veterans have counted on the previous GI Bill to both help with tuition and pay rent, often unaware that it may take weeks or months for them to receive their first GI Bill check. Even though the implementation of the new GI Bill provides for direct payments to institutions, it is likely



that these payments will continue to be delayed, as institutions work with the VA to create an entirely new model for the delivery of education benefits. Meanwhile, both veterans and institutions will continue to look for stopgap solutions to offset administrative delays. “Veterans are taking out loans and schools are giving deferments,” said Steve Frantz, director of student services for the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system (MNSCU). “We both need help with a more systematic approach from the government and the payment system.” Currently, though, deferment programs such as MNSCU’s are not common practice.

A second major administrative hurdle that many veterans face is finding institutions that recognize their military training and experience during the admissions process. Comparing the high school grade point average of a 26-year-old veteran to that of a high school senior doesn’t do justice to the range of experiences and leadership skills the veteran will bring to campus. Veterans also want the academic credit recommendations for their military training and experience (see Experience that Counts) to count toward their degrees. Unfortunately, veterans may spend hours traipsing from one campus office to another, trying to figure out why their documented training won’t count toward a degree program in a related field. “They don’t even transfer. . . . [Those credits are treated] like monopoly money,” lamented one veteran in a focus group.

This frustration is expressed by higher education leaders as well: “Transfer credit is one nightmare we have to overcome,” said California State University Chancellor Charles Reed. “While vets are going through transition, the paperwork and bureaucracy are unbelievable.”

Still other veterans find that their military training, documented on an [AARTS](#) or [SMART](#) transcript, does help them fulfill elective course requirements. For some veterans, this worked well, allowing them to focus on coursework in their major. Said one veteran in a focus group, “You get

#### **Not Losing Ground: Policies for Deployment**

[Southern Connecticut University’s deployment policy](#) provides activated students with a complete refund of tuition, fees, and book costs. As students are redeployed during different times of the semester, staff assist them in considering the best options for making academic progress.

#### **Experience that Counts: ACE Military Transcripts**

For more than 60 years, ACE has provided services to evaluate training programs and occupations in the military sector. College faculty conduct these evaluations and make academic credit recommendations as appropriate.

Currently, more than 7 million adult learners are able to gain access to postsecondary education through the use of military transcripts. Veterans and their academic advisers can easily access the [ACE Military Guide Online](#) for current information on ACE-evaluated military training. In addition, veterans can use the site to access their transcripts for military educational experiences.

some credit, even if it's not in your field. . . . Maybe [the credits] are there to motivate the person to pursue a degree and get in a career field."

### **At Ease: Supportive Climates Aid Transitions**

*"What veteran-friendly colleges don't do is coddle veterans. Instead, they create environments in which vets have the tools to engage in debate and make use of resources."*—Luke Stalcup, Army combat veteran and Georgetown University student.

On top of administrative snafus with education benefits and transfer credits, veterans sometimes experience a less than welcoming campus climate. Luke Stalcup, an Army combat veteran who is currently enrolled in Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, recalled being told by a staff member at another institution, "Go stand over there. You are not special. We'll deal with you when we can deal with you." Stalcup added, "It's not that we'll get our feelings hurt. We're a tough bunch. But words carry the weight of the institution, determine the resources we get, and reflect respect that others on campus show."

Discussions at the Veterans Summit reflected other examples of isolation. "I didn't know other veterans on campus. And I wasn't able to relate to younger students not in the military," said Derek Blumke, cofounder and president of Student Veterans of America and a senior at the University of Michigan. "A student in one class asked me: 'Were you in the military? Did you kill anyone?' After that, I became hesitant to tell people I had been in the military." With these kinds of encounters, veterans may want to lower their visibility—all the more reason why institutions must make greater efforts to foster veterans' feeling that they belong within the academic community.

Providing opportunities for contact with peers is a good place to start, especially during the first semester, when colleges and universities often lose veterans. To counter feelings of isolation and to increase retention, institutions and veterans' groups are looking at a number of approaches, including one-stop services, veterans' centers, and peer organizations. Through the national organization [Student Veterans of America](http://www.studentveterans.org), for example, veterans are becoming more visible and more vocal on their campuses, highly



motivated as they are to make the college experience a positive one for future student veterans. As one veteran noted, “Once you find a peer, you become visible.”

### **Getting There One Step at a Time: Ten Ways to Become More Veteran Friendly**

Many ideas to help colleges and universities become more veteran-friendly have emerged, not only from the Veterans Summit and focus groups, but from ongoing conversations with higher education leaders. Here are 10 ways your institution can build good policy and practice.

**Listen to veterans.** “The more you listen, the more we speak,” urged one veteran—and the more institutions learn what works and what doesn’t work for veterans. To begin listening, hold a roundtable of high-level campus administrators and student veterans. Veterans are as diverse as any other students that colleges serve and it’s important to understand the *range* of their needs and hopes, from housing options and opportunities for career networking, to peer mentors who foster their academic advancement.

**Assess your institution’s strengths and weaknesses.** Once you have heard student veterans’ feedback, consider programs, services, and policies that could be initiated or improved. After the Veterans Summit, for example, participants completed a follow-up survey to identify initiatives they jump-started upon their return to campus—such as putting peer mentoring programs in place for newly arrived student veterans, establishing scholarships for severely injured student veterans, and forming partnerships with local businesses to create employment pathways.

#### **For Service, Stop Here**

The [Sonny Montgomery Center for America’s Veterans](#) at Mississippi State University provides comprehensive benefits counseling; partners with the university’s counseling center to offer a Veterans Support Group; and upon graduation, provides transitional assistance from academic programs into the civilian workforce.

[Cleveland State University’s SERV](#) program (Supportive Education for the Returning Vet) also helps veterans transition from soldier to civilian to student. Because the first year is often the most challenging, SERV bridges the gap by providing support services to student veterans during their freshman year, as well as those who have previously completed coursework at CSU or other institutions and are now returning to college.

**Start a student veterans group.** If you have two veterans attending your college, start a veterans association. One example among a growing number of groups is [San Diego State University's Student Veteran Organization](#), which makes sure that veterans get their education benefits and advocates for better policies and practices, while at the same time providing peer support. And Columbia University's [U.S. Military Veterans of Columbia University](#) serves as an online rallying point for student veterans, faculty, and staff.

**Design a place for veterans to gather.** As one veteran put it, “You don’t have to build a fancy building with memorials and huge staff. You need a space, a battered flag, and veterans who can serve as staff, through the Department of Veterans Affairs work study program.” Peer-to-peer support and resource centers can connect veterans to one another—which can also improve retention. [Salt Lake Community College’s Collegiate Veterans Center](#), for example, offers a lounge area where student veterans can relax and take advantage of academic resources, with access to computers, printers, and tutors in English and computer science.

**Have a point of contact.** There are many ways to do this. For example, the [University of Wisconsin–Madison](#) created the position of [assistant dean of veterans and ombuds services](#) to serve approximately 500 student veterans. The dean acts as point person for students who are deployed and helps lessen the impact of rapid deployment, separation, re-entry, and relocation. The University of California, Los Angeles’s [Veterans Resource Team](#), made up of college administrators from a variety of departments and programs such as Financial Aid, Counseling, the Career Center, Transfer Student Center, and Housing, is another example of providing one point of contact, offering comprehensive resource information to veterans.

**Re-orient student orientation.** [Porterville College](#), a community college in Porterville, California, offered its first [Veterans Orientation](#) in January 2008. The veterans counselor there informed student veterans about new campus policies, provided legislative updates on education benefits, and introduced a new veterans group. Flexible scheduling makes

orientation more accessible to new student veterans. And interaction with peers, faculty, and staff eases their transition.

**Build programs that access veterans' strengths.** The [Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans](#) (EBV) with disabilities—a growing national consortium of universities—has done just that. Said James Haynie, veteran and leader of Syracuse University's EBV: "Vets are good at entrepreneurship. There is no more serious predictor than prior military service. And it's good for disabled vets especially. They are the most likely to become entrepreneurs, and the most likely to succeed."

**Educate faculty, staff, and students.** "In order to help students, you need to help the faculty and administration," advised one veteran. Administrators and faculty who can inform and guide are vital to veterans' success. But the institutional shifts that are required aren't easy, and often call for major efforts to raise faculty, staff, and student awareness. Montgomery College's Combat2College program (see [Support for Veterans, Training for Faculty and Staff](#)) is one example of comprehensive training that creates a supportive environment for both wounded soldiers and the faculty and administrators who serve them. Such programs engage the higher education community and foster their commitment to a veteran-friendly environment.

**Partner with other organizations.** To serve veterans effectively, colleges and universities need the expertise of other sectors. [Bristol Community College](#), for example, is harnessing the power of coalitions to find employment for veterans. The college, located in southeastern Massachusetts, has partnered with the [University of Massachusetts–Dartmouth](#), the pre-K-12 school system, the state's departments of Workforce Development and Veteran Affairs, the Workforce Investment Board, and a local career center, as well as community leaders and elected officials. "Our purpose is to find . . . not just any jobs, but jobs that

#### **Support for Veterans, Training for Faculty and Staff**

In Maryland, Montgomery College's [Combat2College](#) (C2C) program is one model that provides support for veterans, as well as the college's faculty and staff. The program is based on the idea that faculty and staff must be well-informed to facilitate a successful college experience for today's veterans. To that end, C2C has developed in-service training opportunities for departments across campus and posts training materials on its web site.

Through its partnerships with the [National Rehabilitation Hospital](#) and [VA Medical Center](#) in Washington, DC, and the [National Center for PTSD](#), in Palo Alto, California, the Combat2College program provides faculty and staff with helpful information about possible clinical issues for veterans and related resources.

hold the prospect of opportunity for a high quality of life,” said Bristol Community College President Jack Sbrega. “By creating this team, we intend to serve veterans efficiently and demonstrate the significant benefits of broad-based collaboration for workforce development, economic development, and the general welfare.”

**Engage your community.** As many higher education leaders observed, community members and alumni often take pride in an institution’s programs for veterans—and they want to contribute. Karen White, chair of University of Idaho’s [Operation Education Scholarship program](#) for wounded veterans, said that presidents should recognize the enormous goodwill that these programs create: “It’s very appealing for people. They want to be able to support veterans. There’s positive press for universities and an amazing awareness in the community about what we’re doing.”

With close to 2 million veterans eligible for the benefits of the new GI Bill, higher education institutions can once again position their programs and services to ease the transition from soldier to student. In turn, this generation of veterans will be poised to contribute to their communities as civilians—filling the nation’s workforce shortages in teaching and health care, leading successful nonprofit organizations, or starting up small businesses to reinvigorate a depressed economy. As we welcome an influx of returning soldiers who are eager to take advantage of expanded education benefits for themselves and their families, we must remember that just getting veterans to campus isn’t enough. We must also organize our programs, services, and policies to reflect veteran-friendly approaches that help these students set and meet educational goals. Simply put, we owe our veterans—and ourselves—the best higher education has to offer.

#### **ACE’s First Stop: Promising Practices in Higher Education for America’s Veterans**

Would you like to learn more about promising practices for veterans in higher education? Does your institution have a promising practice you would like to share?

Visit [First Stop](#), ACE’s online resource for examples of promising practice and policy; current research and reports; and lifelong learning resources for military veterans and the colleges and universities that serve them.

#### **ACE’s Military Programs**

Since World War I, the American Council on Education (ACE) has been a bridge for veterans and higher education institutions, advocating for increased access and fostering good practice on college campuses. From the evaluation of military courses and occupations for academic credit to support for the severely injured in their transition from soldier to student, ACE has implemented [programs and services](#) to assist veterans as they seek to begin or resume postsecondary education.